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Identity as Ideology in the Empire that Would Not Die

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It is a great honour to be invited by Paolo Tedesco to comment on John Haldon's latest book on what the author, quite to the point, has called the paradox of East Roman survival in the period between the 640s and the 740s.¹ Almost twenty years after his classical study on the transformation of Byzantine culture in the long seventh century,² Haldon has revisited this important period of Byzantine history seeking to answer a different but equally important question, namely how did the Empire manage to overcome one of the major crises in its long existence, the crisis triggered by the emergence and expansion of the Islamic Caliphate. My comments will focus on a certain aspect of Haldon's major undertaking, specifically the author's treatment of issues of ideology and identity in the period in question. These issues form the main topic of two chapters of the book, chapter 2 on "Beliefs, Narratives, and the Moral Universe" and chapter 3 on "Identities, Divisions, and Solidarities", although they pervade other parts as well (e.g. chapters 4, "Elites and Interests", and 7, "Organization, Cohesion, and Survival").

I have to admit that writing a short review-essay on a book with whose main theses I find myself in agreement has proved harder than I had initially thought. To avoid producing an en-

¹ Haldon, 2016.

² Haldon, 1990.

comium in the good old Byzantine manner regarding the importance of a leading scholar's contribution to research on this period – something I imagine no one, and least of all the author of the book, would like to read – I have decided to attempt an analysis of Haldon's methodology, stressing in particular the theoretical foundations of his approach to Byzantine ideology and identity. I believe that such an approach can be useful and interesting for two reasons: First, because both these analytical terms have a highly charged and much-debated theoretical background; and second, because research on these issues in the Byzantine Empire has a long tradition of intense dialogue, which has recently been revived.

Certainly, Haldon's book was not intended to provide another holistic approach to the dominant ideology or the collective identity of the historical social formation we call Byzantium, even though his conclusions clearly bear important implications for the period preceding and, mainly, following that under scrutiny. His main aim – one he well accomplishes – was to investigate the societal role of ideas, beliefs and identifications during a concrete period of extensive change by excavating beneath the surface of a large number of sources. The critical use of different kinds of sources, both from the Constantinopolitan centre and from the provincial periphery, and the ability to distinguish which of those can tell us what about different social strata is what makes Haldon's study valuable, affording insight into ideology and identity not only from the top down but also from the bottom up. The book's greatest merit from the standpoint of our topic is that it does not seek to unveil the true core of Byzantine identity or the essential component of that social order's dominant ideology – a problem inherent to many studies that have attempted a holistic approach to the collective identity or the operative ideology of the Byzantine order.

Within this framework, the interrelation of the analytical terms ideology and identity, as suggested in the title of my essay, represents what I consider to be the study's point of departure from the theoretical viewpoint. Instead of trying to reconstruct Byzantine Romanness as an identity in the hard sense, one ostensibly shared by

all in that pre-modern social order, Haldon's research focuses on identifications as social processes dependent upon the different function of dominant ideas and beliefs concerning the East Roman order in different geographical, social and political contexts. This explicitly anti-essentialist and anti-reifying approach to identity is what determines its dialectical relationship with the dominant ideology of the East Roman social order in the period examined.

The author's approach is evidently influenced by the Marxist tradition and serves as a good reminder that that tradition, especially in its so-called neo-Marxist version, has been the most successful in bridging the two different strands of thought in the study of ideology, namely the epistemological and the sociological. That said, it is important to stress that Haldon's analysis of the role of a dominant ideology in the empire that would not die is not concerned with distinguishing between false and true or, for that matter, secular (rationalistic) and religious (non-rationalistic) ideas and beliefs. Scrutiny of the mystifying aspect of ideology is left aside in favour of a socio-historical approach that scrutinizes the actual societal function of ideas irrespective of their fictitious or non-fictitious character.

I believe that it is primarily a sophisticated understanding of the Gramscian concept of hegemony that provides the theoretical background for Haldon's approach to the East Roman order's dominant ideology and its societal function, i.e. its potential to evoke various degrees of identification and consent.³ Constantinopolitan hegemony was summarized in the central message that the unity of the imperial order was determined by the divinely-ordained orthodox monarchy of the emperor of Constantinople, which had to be protected against the external and internal enemies threatening it. The fact that the majority of the Empire's populations bought into this message was not so much a reflection of legitimation in the Weberian sense and ideological homogenization as the basis for political unity; it involved, rather, hegemony as political leadership protected by

³ For the role of consensus vs. coercion in Gramsci's theory of hegemony, see Martin, 1998, esp. 114-138.

the armour of coercion, that is, hegemony in a context in which coercion and consent existed in a dialectical relationship.

According to the author, if “the Roman Empire was the only world and the only polity the inhabitants of the Eastern Empire could envisage, the constant presence of the imperial administration in the provinces, embodied in local secular and religious élites and in the imperial armies, permitted both central government and the church to reinforce imperial authority and, where necessary, to maintain their control over the provincial populations” (p. 156). The role of state structures in reproducing the vision of a hierarchical political order with Constantinople and its emperor at the top, and in circumscribing political and cultural identifications at different levels in relation to it, was one part of the equation. The second part was the role of the apparatuses of “civil society” as the principal means for disseminating this dominant ideological message and promoting its function concerning a unity of ideological purpose beyond the level of the social elite. This key issue emerges as the central question that the author addresses – a difficult task and one that undoubtedly represents the book’s foremost contribution to the topic under discussion.

Haldon takes into account the transformation of the late Antique city culture in the period in question, marked by the regression of education and the organizations of the circus factions in the provinces, and naturally focuses on the main remaining apparatus of “civil society”, i.e. the church, in order to seek an answer to the above-mentioned question. However, what makes Byzantium a peculiar case-study is that the Constantinopolitan Church had become part of the imperial state apparatuses by this time, as Haldon correctly emphasizes. This dual function of the church as an apparatus both of the state and of “civil society” facilitates an approach to a medieval social formation, such as Byzantium, from the perspective of the Gramscian concept of the “integral state”, in which “civil society” is not considered as juxtaposed to the state, but, rather as a component of it. The centralized seventh-century imperial state, though not a bureaucratic state in the modern infrastructural sense, could be much more effective in ideologically penetrating “civil so-

ciety" than any other state of its time (at least in the Euro-Mediterranean sphere) thanks to its intertwinement with the Constantinopolitan Church.

The balanced Gramscian approach to the tyrannical socio-historical question "coercion or consent" regarding the driving force behind societal cohesion enables Haldon to suggest the more plausible approach to the evident problems posed by the nature of the sources as well as by the nature of a medieval social order. For instance, even though the ideological influence of the church was admittedly more far-reaching than that of any other state apparatus in this period, the actual extent to which the religious or political ideas it conveyed pervaded the provincial populations that lived outside the shrunken urban centres and amounted to 80-90% of the entire population in the period after the 640s remains an open question. Apart from the fact that, as the author notes, not every community had a church or a priest, one must also consider that preaching as the principal vehicle for conveying such messages was restricted to a certain number of qualified clergymen; not every priest was allowed to undertake this task. On the other hand, peasants and pastoralists who had to make a living could certainly not spend most of their time in church.

Bearing these problems in mind, close examination of the ideological content of imperial and canon law, which played an equal role in providing medieval Eastern Roman society's deontological framework, leaves little room for doubt that orthodox Christian identity had become the principal cultural marker of Byzantine Romanness up to the mid-eighth century as a consequence of the identification between imperial state and church. The author shows that this development cannot be properly understood outside the dialectical context of the political and military entanglement between Byzantium and its new major enemy, the Caliphate. The Christian Empire of the *Ecloga* is inconceivable outside the context of the frontal clash with Islam, which as a new barbarian and infidel "other" (the two notions being synonymous in this case) co-determined the renegotiated content of the Byzantine "self". The full-

blown identification of Christianity and Empire was, *inter alia*, a response to and a by-product of the major threat posed by an emergent Islamic empire whose political theology was pervaded by notions of world domination and religious triumphalism.

While highlighting the conducive role of religious worldviews in the renegotiation of the political and cultural boundaries of Romanness in this period, the author distances himself from older approaches to Byzantine identity as a homogenous and rather apolitical Christian identity. He avoids a reifying approach to religious culture by carefully considering the role of social stratification and regional differentiation in conditioning the variation of conformity of religious belief and practice within the imperial boundaries. Moreover, he distinguishes between the Empire as a political community and the Christian commonwealth that lay beyond its borders after the 640s. His approach to religion's political role within the borders of imperial authority is the best response to two contrasting but equally essentializing images of Byzantium, as a Christian commonwealth or as a secular republic of the people. Within this framework, if the church was the main apparatus through which the state could reach down to the provincial masses in ideological terms, the army was the main state apparatus that defined the boundaries of the Roman political-territorial community and determined its ability to maintain a necessary degree of cohesion and prevent political disintegration in the periods of relentless Muslim onslaught.

For his analysis of the army's role, Haldon draws on his own exhaustive studies on the extensive rearrangement of Byzantine military structures during the so-called dark centuries.⁴ The billeting of the eastern forces across Anatolia and their concentration on local/regional defense has been repeatedly emphasized as a decisive factor for the successful repulsion of a Muslim expansion into Asia Minor. By stressing the role of geographical proximity to the capital and the differentiated presence/performance of imperial forces as

⁴ For all previous bibliography, see, Brubaker-Haldon, 2011.

an explanation of the different outcomes of the Empire's effort to defend various provinces against the emerging Caliphate, the author debunks older, oversimplifying explanations that were keen to attribute the staunch defense in Anatolia – as opposed to the rapid loss of the eastern provinces – to the loyalty of Chalcedonian populations, i.e. to a reified common identity. Haldon acknowledges that internal dissension in the Caliphate played a role in disturbing the Muslim advance and demonstrates that there was nothing exceptionally patriotic in the reported reactions of the Anatolian populations to the Muslim onslaught. Thus, he pinpoints the role of state structures, namely the military and the church (secular and religious elites), in circumscribing ideological commitment and identifications in Asia Minor. On the other end, against the background of the disintegrated older elite structures and an inadequate military presence in the aftermath of the Persian occupation, questions of doctrinal difference took on greater political importance and played a role in the Empire's reduced potential to defend the eastern provinces against the new foe.⁵

By not assigning a causal role to ideology and identity in the Empire's survival as the determining factors of the successful repulsion of the Islamic threat, Haldon's account demonstrates first and foremost that a multi-causal approach to the process of survival can provide valuable insight into how a political and military crisis enhanced the salience of ideas able to play an operative role and underpin identifications with changing socio-political structures in a constant dialectical relationship with them. Moreover, his account demonstrates how inter-group warfare could simultaneously have a destructive and a constructive impact on the solidarity of the East Roman political community in this period. On the one hand, the

⁵ The central role of provincial elites and their vested interests in the imperial order is treated in chapter 5 of the book, where comparison between the Italian and the eastern provinces in juxtaposition to Anatolia demonstrates the differentiated role of the kind of external threat and of proximity to the imperial center (i.e. of the imperial power's capability for immediate military and economic intervention) in maintaining provincial loyalty.

Muslim offensive, which occurred shortly after the end of the Persian occupation, dealt the final blow to the weakened imperial state structures in the East – where the religious-ideological dissension between the “orthodox” Constantinopolitan center and the Monophysite periphery had been nurtured for quite a time – thus creating a context for political separation and alienation. On the other hand, the same offensive contributed to a rearrangement of state structures in Anatolia, which was conducive to the renegotiation of the substance and practices of identification of Roman populations there.

The shrunken empire that emerged from the crisis in the mid-eighth century was no longer an agglomeration of cities with the imperial city at the top. It was, rather, an agglomeration of large military commands under the centralized rule of the Constantinopolitan emperor. In this new constellation, next to the church, the army’s role in political affairs became central thanks to its vital contribution to preventing the further loss of territory, but also because it became one of the chief means of politically re-connecting the imperial capital with the provinces. Besides the bishops, the main bearers of imperial authority in the provinces were now the generals of the regionalized armies of the *strategides*. From the mid-seventh century onward, the integration of soldiers into the local structures and the localization of recruitment transformed these armies and their *strategoï* into the main representatives of provincial interests in the bilateral relationship between the various regions and the imperial city-state, but also into bearers of provincial voices in matters of central government.

Haldon’s account provides the most sophisticated analysis to date of the processes of militarization and further centralization of the East Roman imperial order between the 640s and the 740s as two central developments related to the contemporary changes in that order’s collective identity and dominant ideology. Elaborating on his own and others’ recent researches, which have definitively laid to rest the older romantic narratives about the Empire’s survival as the work of a “national” army of thematic peasant-soldiers, the author demonstrates that the remaining Roman populations’ solidarity

and identification with the imperial center was not the cause of the Empire's survival in the period in question, but rather its outcome. It was the continuity of an internally transformed state that determined the continuity of identification practices circumscribed by the operative ideology of the divinely-ordained orthodox monarchy of the Roman emperor of Constantinople over a Christian empire whose Islamic counterpart had come to function as nearly its mirror image by the mid-eighth century.